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Kok, Charise Oral History Interview: Class Projects

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Oral History Interview
Michigan History – Spring 2000
Interviewee: Charise Kok
Interviewer: Craig Gruner
4 March 2000

CG: It can be stuff that is interesting, something that someone would want to know. Do you know what I'm saying? Because who's going to look at this is, the people years and years from now and their going to say, back in the year 2000, who was living in Holland, and you're going to be on there. So all the little stories, stories about your grandchildren...

CK: Yeah you have it on now? I knew a Professor from the Netherlands, Peter Stockfis. He wanted to find out all the immigration on the people who came here all those years ago in 1950's. It was very nice. He lived three months in my house. My husband died 25 years ago, so a long time ago...many of kids.

CG: So he stayed here for three months then, and he just learned?

CK: Yes, and I lived in another house at that time.

CG: Seriously, don't even worry about that [referring to tape recorder]. Hopefully we'll just forget that this thing is even on and we'll just talk and have a conversation. So don't worry about it. The interesting things that people find about history aren't necessarily, you know, where were you born, but stories that are all about your life that make you interesting. So I guess if you want to start right up, we can with the formal questions.

CK: Ok go ahead.

CG: The first question on here, we've talked about it before but we'll get it on the tape. What part of the Netherlands are you from? So if you just wanted to explain where you're from.

CK: I was born in the providence of Gronigen, close to the German border line. Do you have to know when?

CG: You said '56 was when you came over?

CK: Yeah, '56.

CG: When I hear that, I automatically think of what happened in the 1940's- World War II.

CK: The World War, yeah. I was 18 years when the war was in the Netherlands. You want to know something about that?

CG: Oh yeah, definitely.

CK: Ok, it was May 10 in the night, when all airplanes came over, the Germans in airplanes. They bombed down, a big city. And they bombed more towns so that they came over to the Dutch. You cannot fight them, the Germans. So there was a time later on when we could not go outside after eight o'clock. From eight until four in the morning, everyone must stay inside.

CG: So were the Germans controlling the area?

CK: Oh yes. Oh yes. There was one house where I lived and they had lights on. And the lights could be seen outside, and the Germans put a bomb on that house. All killed. You have to put all blankets on all the windows so you cannot see the light outside. There can be no lights shining out of the house and if the Germans saw any light, they bombed.

CG: You could have lights on, like a lamp, but you can't take like a flashlight and shine it.

CK: But that has to be all covered up, so that the light cannot get outside. Anyway, I was 18

when the war started and I was 22 when the war was over. It was in May, May 1945.

The War was from 1940 from 1945. We never went hungry, we had food always. My dad had a store so sometimes, in a dry goods store you can exchange for milk or for something like that, you know? You can do that, and that was good. No, we were never hungry. But a lot of people in the Netherlands especially in the big cities were hungry. They eat tulip bulbs. They would ball the grass and eat it.

CG: That's just so interesting because that's the age that I am right now, 18-22. So I couldn't imagine.

CK: Yeah that's pretty scary. There were a lot of good German soldiers who hated it too. But you have to fight. There were no other opportunities for them.

CG: I'm not sure, did the Netherlands ever join in the fight against or with the Germans? Did you know anybody that went into the army that actually fought in WWII?

CK: No, not that I can think of. Not from my family anyway. Let's see what else happened? Ask me what you want to know.

CG: It was just interesting, kind of important things that are going on in history. What you were doing at the time is interesting. It's not on this sheet at all but it's really interesting I think. I'm a history major so that's something that I'm very interested in. The next question on here is: Can you describe your homeland and what it was like? Just any kind of every day thing, every day life.

CK: I went to grade school. My dad had a dry goods store. There were four kids in the family. Later on I went to an all girls school.

CG: This is after grade school?

CK: After grade school. I went four years to an all-girls school. I had to go on a bike everyday. Snow, rain or not, you go on a bike to school. It never bothered me, you get used to that. You don't have a car so you go on a bike. I went there for four years. My youngest brother, the Germans have to pick him up to work in Germany. The Germans pick a lot of people from the Netherlands to work for them. And my brother too. So, my father and mother gave the store to my brother who now the owner of the store, so then he doesn't have to go. That was his work, he could not go. I don't know exactly how they did it but my father and mother got out and my brother came in and took the store. Boy, that's so long ago. It's over 50 years ago!

CG: I'm impressed that you can remember all of this.

CK: I overlap now a little bit. It was in 95, I was in the Netherlands again. That was the 50 year anniversary. And it was beautiful. That was beautiful. The Netherlands is nice. It's little. Small little town. Amsterdam is not nice.

CG: Amsterdam isn't nice?

CK: Not a good city.

CG: Are there a lot of tourists that go there?

CK: Yeah a lot of tourists. When I was a girl I swam then too. Right after school. You go to school, your bathing suit with you and sliced bread, and right after school you go to the swimming pool. It was an open pool, you know, that's cold. I swam from then after that time. I mixed it up a little bit. I mixed this up and this up. I didn't understand everything you asked me.

CG: So how far from Germany was your home?

CK: 25 miles.

CG: Wow, really close.

CK: Yeah, close to Germany so we could always hear when the airplanes from England came over and bombed Germany. And that was scary. So you see Germany tried to get them down, the airplanes. Yeah it was awful. May 10, in 1940 the Germans came into the Netherlands, and Poland, and Denmark I suppose. But 10 May they came into the Netherlands. That was awful. German soldiers came into the store to buy clothes for their kids in Germany. And all the soldiers have to go to Friesland, that's another province, and thru a road between waters, the "Afsluidijk," you don't know what it is. That is a road, one side water, and the other side water, and the road goes through the middle. And the Germans have to go there and the Netherlands are fighting and a lot of Germans drowned over there in the water.

CG: Because they were on the road?

CK: A big building,... were you make the road from? How do you call that?

CG: How do you make the road?

CK: No, that hard stuff.

CG: Pavement, concrete?

CK: Yeah, concrete, that's the word. The Dutch soldiers were there and they have to poof poof poof. It was horrible. So it took four days and the Netherlands was captured, after four days. So you don't have to write down nothing, it just comes here?

CG: Yeah, so just talk as fast as you wanna talk.

So you came in 1956. You said there was a 50 year reunion?

CK: In '95, the 50 year reunion of the Germans losing the war. Everyone has holidays in the

Netherlands, you know. Everything was with the color orange. You had all trees with real oranges hanging in it. And all the school kids, just like its Tulip Time here, something like that.

CG: Is that a holiday every year?

CK: No, that was 50 years. It was something special. But that is always on May 5, May the 5th.

CG: So why did you leave?

CK: Well, there was not much work after the war. My husband and my father-in-law, they had together a business for tape measures. They did a lot of work but when Germany moved up economically--they could not keep up and folded the business. Germany is good in business you know. So it didn't go too well, and my husband said we'd go to the United States.

CG: So Germans came up and took the business? They took the jobs?

CK: Yeah, they could make it a lot cheaper, you know? More quantity....

CG: More for less money.

CK: Yeah, my husband always wanted to go here. I never want to go over here. It took us three years to get here--we had our names on a list for emigration. Before we can go you have to find a sponsor here. And my brother was here already and he found a sponsor for us. So, after a long time we came in '56.

CG: So you didn't want to come? You just didn't want to leave your home?

CK: No, my family. You leave all your family behind. You don't know where you go and you don't have much money and you have three kids. So that was a hard thing. You

live during the war and now you know how to handle your food and you can stretch it better. And there wasn't that much. So you have to have whatever there was.

CG: So you got good at surviving. So how long had you been married, you said you had three kids and then you moved?

CK: Let's see, how long was I married. 12, 13 years I suppose. Something like that. The children were ages 3, 6, and 8. And I learned a lot of English from the kids. And learned a lot of English from TV. When you can see it you can talk about it. But I never learned the grammar in English, you know. My English writing is not the best. Then we came here, then on the telephone. My husband sharpened and repaired lawnmowers after work, he did that at home. He had a machine for that. And then people, they ask, when can we pick them up? Tuesdays and Thursdays sound the same to me. Then they say the day after Monday or the day after Wednesday. They laugh about it but they knew what it meant.

CG: You have to do what you can I guess.

CK: I was not at a school where you learn the language. From the TV and kids I learned the words for the household and for the cooking, and so on.

CG: So did you learn before you came?

CK: Yeah, a couple lessons. Not so much. When we sat in the church and the minister says "Amen" that means you can go home.

CG: So when you came here did you have a difficult time because you couldn't speak English?

CK: Not too bad. Both my neighbors spoke Dutch. Yeah a lot of people were talking Dutch.

But that was not good for me because you never learn the language.

CG: It helps though, I'm sure.

CK: Oh yeah

CG: So is that why you came to Holland then, because of the Dutch community?

CK: No, there was not much work after the War.

CG: No, I meant when you came, why did you specifically come here?

CK: I had a brother here, and a cousin. My brother was here and my cousin and he found a sponsor for us.

CG: So did you fly directly over to Michigan?

CK: No, we flew to New York, I don't know why. Then we came on a train.

CG: Well, NY is pretty popular usually when you come in—the whole Statue of Liberty.

CK: No we came not in a boat, we flew.

CG: Flew?

CK: Yeah, we flew to New York. And with the three little kids we went on the train. We didn't know what a ticket was. They came and asked for tickets. And my husband say, I don't know what a ticket is. But anyway, we had some nice times, you know, good times. But, my holidays and weddings, you always miss your family.

CG: So did you try to keep in pretty good touch?

CK: Yeah, now you call a lot quicker. At that time you didn't call, it cost too much. And you had three kids in Christian school and that cost a lot of money. My husband went to a Christian school and I was also in a Christian school. My husband [said] "I don't want to go to America if I cannot put my kids in a Christian school." So I want to do that. So

then I worked also, I cleaned, houses. Whatever.

CG: That was your first job that you had when you came here? It was cleaning houses?

What did your husband do?

CK: My husband worked at Salem Woodworking. The first time he came here, he works on roofing. He never did roofing in Netherlands, we don't know how to. You have to try everything. Then one day he gets the tar all over his hands. Then he couldn't work.

When you don't work you get no salary either, you know. We are not used to that. No, if there is sickness, you have better insurance in the Netherlands.

CG: You didn't have that over here?

CK: Not right away. My youngest son was born here in '57 when he was born it was a little difficult extra money and we had to pay for the birth ourselves. For one year, I believe so, you have to be one year in the insurance and we were not...nine months. So that was not good either.

CG: So you came with three?

CK: I came with three and the forth one was born over here.

CG: Any more after that?

CK: No. That was the end of it.

CG: So then he switched to woodworking? Was that furniture?

CK: No, woodworking, more covered doors and I don't know what else. Then he worked as a tool and die maker. And then he made better money. He worked on blueberry machines in Grand Haven. There was a factory in Grand Haven.

CG: So he made the machines?

CK: Yeah, so that was pretty good. But I could not find another job either because of the language. That was a handicap, the language.

CG: So when did you start working for the hospital?

CK: After my husband died in '74. Oh '75, something like that. And it was 20 years. They called me there the lady with the accent. I know more from this time than from 1940 from the war. I was 18 years at that time. It was a long time ago.

CG: I could imagine, I've only been alive for 20 years and I can't remember 10 years ago. So why did you pick the U.S.? Just because of your cousin and your brother?

CK: Yeah.

CG: Or Canada, somewhere else.

CK: He first wanted to go to Canada. My husband liked farming. But anyway, we came here. They had a sponsor for us.

CG: So you didn't stay in NY for very long? Just in passing?

So in 1956, what was your first impressions of Holland? Here, we're in Holland so....

CK: Not too good. Do I have to be honest?

CG: Yeah, as honest as you want to be.

CK: When you see all these stores and all the wooden steps. The money that you pay that goes in a little container and goes through a chute to the other end of the store in a store from one end to another, I never saw that before. But that was the way it was. But the other side, all the groceries were always so cheap. The butter was cheap. The bread was cheap. Everything was so cheap here. You buy more for the dollar at that time as now.

CG: How big was Holland?

CK: Big. And the streets were big and so many cars. Couldn't believe it, so many cars. No bikes. No bikes. Not much. Now a lot more bikes. But no bikes at that time. And we bought our first car for only \$125. I worked for it. I worked, I cleaned houses, and saved the money so that we can buy a car for \$125.

CG: \$125 for a car?

CK: Yeah, but at that time my husband works in Zeeland so he had to have transportation.

CG: So how about your first impression, were you accepted by the community?

CK: Oh yeah.

CG: Everybody was pretty nice?

CK: Yeah, we had a good name, the Dutchmen. You were clean, and hardworking. The Vietnamese are hard working people too. But when you come here you say hey, you have to work and do your best and you have to save and do what you can. And when you come here with that idea you come in the United States, you know. You come with that idea. You come home with that...

CG: Attitude?

CK: Yeah! Right! You come home with that attitude here. But I was many times homesick. I want to go back on a bike. But it is not possible.

CG: I tried to remember, I was going to ask one more thing. I can't remember it.

CK: You want another cup of coffee?

CG: Sure

(Break)

CG: [do you like living in this].....community?

CK: Yeah, most of it. You see there's not much little kids here, (condo "village") more older people.

CG: So you like living here then?

CK: Yeah, I live here ten years now. One thing, it's so nice, you don't have to cut your grass and you don't have to do snow. You have to do nothing outside. You want another piece of chocolate? I'd love a piece of chocolate. Oh you may not have some. Are you afraid you gain for sport?

CG: No I gave it up for Lent. You know, the Easter thing, Lent.

CK: That is a good thing. That's a good thing

CG: Obviously there are going to be some differences between the United States and the Netherlands. Can you think of any major things that you weren't used to when you came?

CK: We never had TV in the Netherlands. Our sponsor gave us a TV at the time. No we never had TV. And grapefruit. I never had grapefruit.

CG: You never had grapefruit?

CK: No I never had grapefruit.

CG: What was your favorite TV show when you came here?

CK: Oh I didn't see much TV at that time. I hated the TV when they were shooting. Kids love that and I hated it.

CG: Cowboys and Indians?

CK: Yeah. The stores are open longer here. 6:00, everything closed in the Netherlands. And

that gives you a little bit more homey here, at family time. Ten o'clock, everybody flies out, there's no home life. Meijer is now 24 hours open. We need both ends in the middle. But the roads here, and the big wide, streets and so on. That was fantastic.

CG: Was it nice to see?

CK: Oh yeah and Lake Michigan, we thought it was an Atlantic Ocean or something like that.

CG: Well, you need wide streets because cars are wider than bicycles.

CK: Everything was so cheap here. Oh, we couldn't get over it. After the war there was not much in the Netherlands. It was expensive because there was nothing. You get food stamps and then you buy groceries.

CG: In the Netherlands you mean?

CK: Yeah.

CG: I remember you saying you didn't want to leave your family. Did you have any difficulties? Did you separate from families? Did you grow farther and farther apart?

CK: No, no, we wrote every week. Every week you write a letter. My husband had 6 sisters. We communicate a lot with each other. But Christmas and Santa Claus Day always get it (December 6). So what Christmas is here, is December 6th in the Netherlands. The first of all I keep that up with my family, Santa Clause, you know. But I could not when the kids go to school and they have presents. Nobody of the kids there have presents cause they have them at Christmas. You have to move it over to Christmas. And we did later on. You live here so you have to do it the way it is here.

CG: Did any other members of your family come to the United States afterwards?

CK: Visiting, just visiting.

CG: So nobody came.

CK: No, no. My husband was the only boy in the family, so no.

CG: Have you gone back besides the 50 year reunion?

CK: Oh yes. I was 8 times back. A couple times they pay for my trip over there. And a couple times I pay myself. In '68 my husband and I were together to the Netherlands. And in '73 we went together, and that was nice. But you have to say goodbye again, and that was rough.

CG: I remember you saying that you stayed in Holland the whole time. You never left anywhere else. You sounded like you had a little bit of a story behind that. Are you going to go into that?

CK: Once moving from the Netherlands here was enough. I never want to move anything else again. No, I was used to it a little bit and I want to stay here.

CG: So have you been happy with Holland the whole time?

CK: Oh yeah, now yes. Not at first.

CG: But you grew?

CK: Now the kids go to school and it was hard for the kids in school because they could not [speak] English either. So learn from your kids too. They said, "Mom you said it wrong you have to say it so-and-so." It is often that my grandchildren are now there and I talk Dutch to my daughter and then my grandson says "oma, English."

CG: So in your home you spoke Dutch then?

CK: Yeah, quite a bit. And the trouble is, we'd have friends too, and they were mostly Dutch

so there you go again. And when you get older, then you will forget English. You really don't talk it anymore. When I was working in the hospital I had to talk English. I worked three years in the school for lunches, for little kids, you have to talk English. Now when you stay the whole day home and you have your Dutch friends, sometimes we sit and we talk, let's talk English, not Dutch. Sometimes they need you to talk Dutch and not English.

CG: So you still have Dutch friends that you speak Dutch to?

CK: Then there is the other generation. My kids don't have that, not anymore.

CG: Your youngest, that was born here, did you teach him Dutch before you taught him English?

CK: A little bit. I say sometime to my husband in Dutch, "Let's go together quick to town, to pick something up." Then he said, "I want to go along." He said it in Dutch you know. So he knows what it was. Most of the time you can understand it quicker than you can talk it.

CG: When you came, besides working at the school and the hospital, were there any other community activities that you did? Did you do anything for Tulip Time at all?

CK: Yeah, I worked in City Hall for a little while. And I worked in the Netherlands Museum for a while during Tulip Time.

CG: Is that the museum right downtown?

CK: Yeah, it is now a motel, a bed and breakfast, on the corner of 12th street and Central Ave. I believe it is.

CG: There's a museum that's down there.

CK: Yeah now the old post office is now the museum. But I worked in the old one. It is a bed and breakfast now on the corner. And sometimes I have people in my house visiting Holland. You sign up for housing visitors to Tulip Time when I lived in another house. Four or five ladies at the same time. I need a new garage door so with the money that they pay, I bought a new garage door. So you get it.

CG: So you've been with the Reformed Church of America?

CK: No, CRC.

CG: Not RCA?

CK: That's the Christian Reformed.

CG: There's Christian Reformed and there's Reformed Church of America, there're two different.

CK: Not much different.

CG: That's what you were in the Netherlands?

CK: Yeah, we called it "Greformeerd." That's the way I was born in.

CG: Since you've been here, have you been in contact with any newer immigrants? You said you didn't have any from your family.

CK: The other people you mean. There were other people. We met them in the Dutch service. Years ago there was a Dutch service. And then a lot of people came and we meet each other. But that is all gone, there's no Dutch service anymore.

CG: So how do you feel about how everyday in the present time it's getting more diverse. It's not just Dutch in Holland anymore. There's Hispanic people coming in. Any views on that?

CK: I don't understand what you mean.

CG: How do you feel about Holland getting more diverse as time goes by?

CK: Oh. More Asian people than Dutch.

CG: More Asian and more Hispanic or Mexican people.

CK: Oh, not really much you can do about it. We had Spanish people living next door in another neighborhood I lived in.

CG: Has your life changed at all since different people started moving here?

CK: No, I can't blame the people who want a good life too. But you have to work for it. You have to work for it.

CG: So do you think that it's the same for when you came here than when someone who is Asian or Hispanic moves in? Do you think they have the same problems that you had to face?

CK: I think so, yeah. Their culture is so different. Our culture was almost the same as the United States. The food and when I buy one pound of ground beef I could do the whole week with that. You use so much meat, and we never used too much meat. You had Sunday a nice piece of meat and then you'd save that for the week. And when you were brought up that way and you still do that when you came here. You can make a living. If you really want to, you can. And the opportunity is here. That is a good opportunity. It all depends on what you are satisfied with. But if you're not satisfied and you want more and more and more.

CG: That's the way it is with anything though. Anywhere in the country, anywhere in the world.

CK: Yeah, and the world is changes, it is different.

CG: Do you feel that Holland is still Dutch? Do you think it's officially Dutch anymore?

CK: No, not so much. No. It changed a lot when the Mexicans came here, and with the Asians, Cambodians and all that.

CG: So, the Tulip Festival, do you think it's on its way out?

CK: I'm not so interested. I never saw so much Dutch costumes as here in the United States. I never saw it in the Netherlands. It is business, tourism.

CG: How about the Cinco de Mayo Festival? That's the Mexican Celebration.

CK: Just before Tulip Time.

CG: Yeah, do you think that's gotten bigger?

CK: I think so, when come a lot more Mexicans.

CG: I wonder if they say the same thing when the celebrate and wear all the ethnic costumes, do people come from Mexico and say, "I don't see that in Mexico..." We're almost done, just a couple more questions.

Do you feel a little bit of pride when you come to Holland? You said that you don't see those costumes in the Netherlands why are they celebrating here. Do you think that it's appropriate that we celebrate Tulip Time over here?

CK: Yeah, for years and years ago maybe. They make a business out of it. I don't go to the Tulip Time Festival. I never go to the parade anymore.

CG: So you don't have any interest. You see it all as a tourist thing.

CK: Yeah, it's good, it's good for Holland. They make a lot of money with it.

CG: I haven't been in Holland during Tulip Time. I've been done with school so we've

always had to leave, so I've always gone back home. This is the first summer that I'm going to be here. I hear all these stories about it.

CK: So you've never seen the Tulip Time Parade either? It is so nice.

CG: I just hear that there are so many people that come to Holland.

Well, I'm just trying to figure out how to finish it. There are a couple more questions that I'm interested in asking. Questions like: do you think,.....I don't know if you were discriminated against because you were an immigrant?

CK: No.

CG: You were pretty well accepted? I remember you saying that it was tough to get a job because you didn't speak the language.

CK: No, it was hard for my husband. He has to make a living, you know. No, always helpful. Always helpful.

CG: How about your children? Did they have a tough time? You said they had a tough time adjusting to going to school, but did they have any problem when they went to get jobs?

CK: Sometime in school, sometimes they had it not so easy in school all the time. A little bit on the side, you know what I mean? You cannot talk English, and they make fun of it. Kids do that all to each other.

CG: So you don't think that you got discriminated against at all?

CK: No, not at all. They were all helpful.

CG: So do they still speak Dutch?

CK: A little bit. I little bit crooked.

CG: They have little accent?

CK: I cannot get rid of my accent. But my kids, you cannot hear it. It is a good opportunity. In the Netherlands I could not drive a car by myself. It was too expensive. So I can do that here. I love to drive my car.

CG: Do you still ride your bike? Do you have a bike?

CK: Yeah, I have a bike. I was in south side school for a little while and then I go on a bike. But my knee operation, I'm scared for falling. When you say you want to have a car, you work first for it. We were never used to credit. No credit. You have to work for it first, save money, and then you can buy it. But you could not buy a house, you could not buy a car, or a washer and dryer or something like that. But we don't have that in the first place.

CG: Did you have the opportunity for that back in the Netherlands?

CK: Not so much as here. Here is better opportunity. You can have easier car, you can have things easier here. Maybe it is now so true that you can use more credit over there too. My mom and dad always told me know what you have over there you work for it and you save your money and then you can buy it. It was always old fashioned. There's nothing wrong with it!

CG: It's smart.

CK: When you get married over there you save your money and then you buy your furniture, what you know you need, and everything, when you have everything you get married. Then you can install your house. You get married quicker. We were more fussy in the house. The furniture has to be good. In the Netherlands.

CG: So when's your next trip?

CK: I don't know, I want to go once more. I'm the only one in my family who is still alive.

All my brothers and sister are gone. And my mom and dad and a couple of brother-in-laws and sister-in-laws. I want to go once more.

CG: For a family reunion?

CK: Yeah, in June. No I won't go then. When I go then I want to go to my own family.

When you go through then you come by different people in the houses. No, I just want to go to my family.

CG: Well, I'm out of questions.

CK: Oh is that thing still on? I don't want to hear myself.

Put it off a minute.

CG: You want me to turn it off?

CK: Yeah.

CG: Maybe I should just say date that it is April 4th, the year 2000.

Information gathered during the initial contact phone call:

DOB 1-6-23 **Location** Scheemda, Netherlands **Spouse's Name** Ted Kok

Date of Marriage 6-4-47